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Cognitive Dissonance: A Conflict of Attitudes, Beliefs, or Behaviors Loading... Cognitive dissonance refers to a situation involving conflicting attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors. This produces a feeling of mental discomfort leading to an alteration in one of the attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors to reduce the discomfort and restore balance. For example, when people smoke and they know that smoking causes cancer, they are in a state of cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance theory, proposed by Leon Festinger, posits that individuals experience discomfort when holding conflicting beliefs or attitudes. This discomfort motivates them to reduce the inconsistency. Cognitive Dissonance Theory was first investigated by Leon Festinger, arising out of a participant observation study of a cult that believed that the earth was going to be destroyed by a flood, and what happened to its members — particularly the really committed ones who had given up their homes and jobs to work for the cult — when the flood did not happen. While fringe members were more inclined to recognize that they had made fools of themselves and to "put it down to experience," committed members were more likely to re-interpret the evidence to show that they were right all along (the earth was not destroyed because of the faithfulness of the cult members). Festinger's 1957 cognitive dissonance theory suggests that we have an inner drive to hold all our attitudes and behavior in harmony and avoid disharmony (or dissonance). This is known as the principle of cognitive consistency. When there is an inconsistency between attitudes or behaviors (dissonance), something must change to eliminate the dissonance. Notice that dissonance theory does not state that these modes of dissonance reduction will actually work, only that individuals who are in a state of cognitive dissonance will take steps to reduce the extent of their dissonance. The theory of cognitive dissonance has been widely researched in a number of situations to develop the basic idea in more detail, and various factors have been identified which may be important in attitude change. What Causes Cognitive Dissonance? Forced Compliance Behavior, Decision Making, Effort. We will look at the main findings to have emerged from each area. Since past behaviors can't be changed, individuals must re-evaluate their attitudes towards what they've done to reduce dissonance. This prediction has been tested: In a classic study, Festinger and Carlsmith (1959) asked participants to perform dull tasks, like turning pegs for an hour. Initially, participants hated the task, but after being paid to lie about its enjoyment, their attitudes changed. When asked to evaluate the experiment, those paid only $1 rated the task as enjoyable, whereas those paid $20 didn't experience dissonance. When it comes to decision-making, dissonance arises from having to choose between two options that each have pros and cons. For example, deciding between a job in a beautiful area or staying near loved ones creates dissonance. To reduce this dissonance, individuals may alter their attitudes towards the chosen option. Researchers asked women to evaluate eight household products, ranging from $15 to $30 in price. The products included an automatic coffee maker, electric sandwich grill, and portable radio. Participants were divided into three groups: a control group, low-dissonance group, and high-dissonance group. Those in the high-dissonance condition chose between two highly desirable products, one rated 1 point lower than the other on an 8-point scale. After reading product reports, participants re-rated their preferences. Findings showed that those in the high-dissonance group spread apart the alternatives more significantly, increasing the attractiveness of chosen products and decreasing the attractiveness of unchosen ones. This suggests they experienced greater dissonance, as they tried to justify their choices by making the less desirable option seem less appealing. The study also explored how effort affects our perception of goals or items. It seems that we value those things most highly that required considerable effort to achieve. This is because achieving something with great effort can cause dissonance if we later evaluate it negatively. To reduce this dissonance, we may convince ourselves that the effort was worthwhile or enjoyable. This phenomenon is known as "effort justification." When we invest effort in a task and it turns out poorly, we experience dissonance. To mitigate this dissonance, we are motivated to think positively about the task's outcome. A classic experiment by Aronson and Mills (1959) demonstrates cognitive dissonance. Female students participated in a discussion on the psychology of sex, with some reading aloud a list of sex-related words to a male experimenter. **Overcoming Discomfort: The Paradox of Embarrassment and Cognitive Dissonance** In an intriguing study, participants faced a humbling task: reading explicit content aloud, inducing **intense self-consciousness**. In contrast, the control group bypassed this exercise, proceeding directly to a mundane discussion on animal sexuality. Post-discussion, all participants rated the engagingness of both the conversation and its contributors. **Surprisingly, those who endured the embarrassing ordeal provided the most favorable assessments**. **Mitigating Inner Turmoil: Strategies for Resolving Cognitive Dissonance** When a voluntary, effort-intensive experience yields disappointing results, individuals often **recontextualize it as captivating**, thereby justifying their investment. Dissonance can be alleviated in three primary ways: 1. **Revising existing convictions** 2. **Introducing new, harmonizing beliefs** 3. **Downplaying the significance of conflicting beliefs** When behavior is a dissonant element, individuals may **modify or abandon the action**. However, this approach often proves challenging, as deeply ingrained habits (e.g., smoking) are hard to break. As a coping mechanism, people might employ **mental rationalizations**, such as questioning established links between smoking and lung cancer. A common dissonance reduction tactic involves **amplifying the appeal of chosen options while diminishing alternatives** ("spreading apart the alternatives"). For instance, an individual might convince themselves that living life to the fullest (including smoking) outweighs the benefits of a longer, more austere existence. This mindset shift **minimizes the discomfort associated with conflicting cognitions**. **Assessing Cognitive Dissonance Theory: Strengths and Limitations** Research on cognitive dissonance has yielded fascinating, sometimes counterintuitive insights into our quest for attitude-behavior consistency, often employing less-than-rational strategies. The theory's testability through experimentation is a significant advantage. Nevertheless, the **subjective nature of cognitive dissonance**, which cannot be directly observed or measured (echoing behaviorist concerns), poses a scientific challenge. Some confusion surrounds the concept of "dissonance". Is it a perception, a feeling, or a feeling about a perception? According to Aronson's revised idea, dissonance might simply be guilt stemming from an inconsistency between one's self-concept and behavior. However, individual differences exist in how people respond to this theory, with highly anxious individuals being more likely to act accordingly. Notably, many studies supporting cognitive dissonance theory have limited ecological validity due to artificial tasks and biased participant samples. Festinger's original theory proposes that cognitive dissonance arises from the discomfort caused by conflicting beliefs or attitudes, leading individuals to seek consistency. In contrast, Heider's Balance Theory emphasizes the desire for balanced relationships among entities, with imbalances prompting attitude changes to restore balance. Both theories address cognitive consistency but in different contexts. Leon Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory has garnered significant attention in fields of motivation and social psychology due to its influential concepts. A new theory introduced in this work addresses why partial rewards, delayed gratification, and effort expenditure during training hinder extinction. The author suggests that a stalemate exists within learning theory because some fundamental assumptions clash with established experimental outcomes. This proposed theory resolves this discrepancy by integrating disparate empirical phenomena, bolstered by experiments specifically designed to test its implications, which are detailed in the text.